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ABSTRACT

Noting that the increasing concern about violence in schools and society in general is evident in recent initiatives undertaken by the government in Victoria, Australia, this study explored students' conflicts in a Victorian primary school, focusing on the role of the teacher in student conflict. Participating in the exploratory study were 6 teachers (1 male and 5 females) teaching various levels ranging from Prep to Year 6. Also participating were 6 students (3 females and 3 males) in Year 4 who were 9- to 10-year-olds. Data were collected by means of student and teacher interviews, participant observation, classroom observations, and document analysis. Findings indicated that teachers perceived conflict similarly as involving physically combative actions and behaviors leading to adverse outcomes. Students viewed conflict as an actively aggressive event that leads to discord. Conflict was found to be a regular part of students' social interactions, with a high proportion of disputes involving access and possession issues. Most conflicts occurred on the playground. On the playground, students most often used contending conflict resolution methods involving force, threat, or verbal and physical tactics. The most common teacher strategies involved contending strategies--traditional and authoritarian tactics such as prejudging, lecturing, separating disputants, and imposing solutions. Teachers believed that teacher intervention was the successful and preferred conflict resolution strategy. Problem solving was the least common teacher approach, with only one teacher using this approach. Within the classroom, conflict management preventative techniques were used before conflicts arose or escalated. The findings suggest a link between teacher and student perception of conflict and the selected conflict management strategies. Findings pose implications for teachers' roles in helping students resolve conflicts. (Contains 34 references.)(KB)

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"I'VE SORTED IT OUT. I TOLD THEM WHAT TO DO!" THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN STUDENT CONFLICT

Paper presented at the AARE Conference Syndey, Australia, 2000

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INTRODUCTION

There is a growing concern about violence in schools and society today. The issue of aggressive behaviour and bullying in schools is receiving much media attention. This is not surprising when conflicts managed destructively or left unresolved, escalate and consequently interfere with the learning process and playground harmony (Deutsch, 1973).

The increasing level of concern about violence in schools (HRSCEET, 1994) is evident in the initiatives undertaken by the Victorian Government over the last few years. The Victorian Government has directed schools to develop anti - bullying policies (Department of Education, 2000). This has contributed to the development of many specific and school-based behaviour management policies and programs, such as conflict resolution (Johnson & Johnson, 1987).

Without denying the importance of conflict management techniques, conflict could be viewed more positively, as a natural and fundamental part of everyday life. Conflict is inevitable during children's classroom and playground interactions. Conflict, when constructively managed, can stimulate development, adaptation and change. But the benefits of conflict are rarely promoted in the interactions of children or adults.

One of the reasons why conflict may be recieving so much recent attention is not because this is a new phenomenon, or because the incidences are reportedly increasing in their number and severity, but because of the difficulties that individuals have in dealing with the often complex issues surrounding conflict.

Teacher actions at a classroom and school level have an important influence on student conflict management. Therefore, this paper focuses on students' interpersonal conflicts and in particular the role of the teacher in the development of student skills.

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LITERATURE OVERVIEW

There has been much research in the area of conflict. For example, researchers have examined the definition and concept of conflict (Johnson and Johnson, 1996; Condliffe, 1991; Deutsch, 1973), origin of conflict, perceptions of parties in conflict and conflict management. Literature about conflict in educational settings is diverse and includes:

(a) the role of conflict in the cognitive, moral and social developmental theories and in the development of social understanding;
(b) the strategies students use to resolve conflicts (Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Smith, Inder & Ratcliff, 1995, Selman and Demorset, 1984); and,
(c) educational conflict resolution programs (Johnson and Johnson, 1987).
This paper is particularly interested in (b) and (c) and the implications for teachers.

Definition of Conflict

As this study focused on how students and teachers perceive and manage conflicts within the primary school context, it is important to determine a definition of conflict. The description of conflict as incompatible goals and overt opposition by one person to another person's actions or statements is similar across various definitions.

Within the school context, conflict is defined as a verbal or physical struggle between two or more children trying to achieve their own goals. It is this definition which will be used throughout this project.

Definition of Resolving Conflict

Folberg and Taylor's definition (1984) of resolving conflicts will be used in this paper for discussion purposes. "The participants in a conflict isolate the issue, develop options, consider alternatives and reach a consensual settlement that will accommodate the participants' needs either between themselves or with a neutral third party" (p.7-8).

Types of Conflict

A growing amount of conflict research in recent years has concerned itself with the question of whether conflict can be waged less destructively. Deutsch (1973) proposed differentiating between conflicts that were 'destructive' and 'constructive'. The former are those that expand beyond the primary issue to related issues, and escalate through the use of threats and coercive strategies and end in the dissatisfaction of both parties. Constructive conflicts, stay focussed on the main issue whilst the parties engage in problem solving and end in mutually satisfying outcomes.

Conflict need not always be destructive, and when skilfully managed can be effective in successful results (Deutsch, 1973, Shantz and Hobart, 1989, and Opotow, 1991). Goldstein, Carr, Davidson and Wehr (1981) reported that scholars had examined the possibility of reducing and regulating conflict and aggression by more effective teaching of the values of co-operation, non aggressive modes of interaction (p.535).

Outcomes for conflicts when managed constructively include higher self esteem, the development of communication skills, decision making, critical evaluation, reasoning and thinking. Constructive conflict management can also promote more positive relationships amongst students (Johnson and Johnson 1987).

In studying and comparing different conflict management strategies used by managers, Burke (1969) found that collaborative problem solving confrontations were strongly associated with constructive resolution, whilst contending (using force) to accept one's position was strongly associated with ineffective conflict management. Collaborative problem solving is potentially a more constructive strategy to manage interpersonal disputes. By collaborative problem solving it is meant negotiation, where two parties define conflict and find creative solutions to it that are satisfying to both parties (Johnson and Johnson, 1994). Conflict education programs that offer conflict resolution and peer mediation programs are based on teaching children collaborative problem solving as an effective means of managing conflicts.

Conflict Management Strategies

A number of conflict management practices have been developed in a wide range of contexts ranging from business, government, schools and training. In recent years a significant change in approach to conflict management has developed in the form of a new pedagogy and literature on peace and mediation. The evolving perspective that conflicts have value led to the development of educational conflict resolution programs (Johnson and Johnson, 1987; Stern, 1997). A substantial body of classroom materials has been written, for example, resource works by Johnson and Johnson (1991, 1987), Cameron and Dupuis (1991), Dreyfuss (1994) Schmidt and Freidman (1991) and Stern (1997).

Constructive conflict management depends on people being skilled enough to choose from a wide repertoire of styles and tactics to support a specific desired outcome. Girard and Kock (1996) reported that a foundational principle of conflict resolution programs is the "idea that students can participate in and resolve their own conflicts and assume at least partial responsibility for their school's climate" (p.119). Effect in resolving conflict calls for the ability to vary strategies according to what will work best in the situation. The implications is

that conflicts can be constructive and effectively managed and that conflict can benefit interpersonal relationships and personal development.

School programs that offer conflict resolution and peer mediation programs are based on the assumptions that schools need to teach children collaborative problem solving as an effective means of managing conflicts.

Perceptions of Conflict

There is limited data on children's perceptions and thoughts on conflict, except what can be inferred from children's ongoing talk and actions during conflict (Shantz and Shantz, 1992; Hartup, 1989). Shantz proposes that: "It might be enlightening to directly study children's perceptions and conceptions of the conflict in which they participate.... to determine what conflict means to those involved"(Shantz, 1987 p.300).

Opotow's (1991) research provides an insight into students' perception of conflict. To examine adolescent conflict beliefs and management strategies, Opotow (1991) worked with seventh grade students. The investigation included how they viewed their opponent and their beliefs about fair conduct. Opotow's (1991) findings about adolescents support the idea that conflict is generally viewed as a negative event.

Very few recent and relevant studies explore and examine teachers' perception of conflict. Investigations into the nature of children's conflicts however, also provide an insight into teachers' perceptions of conflicts and teachers' perceptions of the individuals participating in the conflicts (for example, Shantz and Hobart, 1989 and Opotow, 1991).

Views of conflict often differ between teachers and students. "Teachers are distant from student conflict and see them (conflicts) as less significant than the participants do" Opotow (1991, p. 429-430). Teacher descriptions, emphasise the pettiness and irrationality of conflicts. One teacher commented, "Nine times out of ten they (children) don't know why they got all worked up" Opotow (1991, p. 430). Results indicate that teachers (as did the students) experience conflict as a "failure" Opotow (1991, p. 425).

Opotow's (1991) results raise important issues regarding teacher perceptions of conflict. One such issue being teachers' overemphasis on reporting toward more memorable, violent fights. Asked about student conflict, teachers recalled the physical confrontations between students that they had seen. Opotow (1991) found that teachers overestimate the frequency of physical fights and underestimate the harmful potential of less obvious conflict (p. 425).

Traditionally, many adults have viewed conflict between children as undesirable and have tried to intervene or prevent disputes. In her examination of adolescent conflicts, Opotow (1991) questioned the stereotype that peer disputes were "senseless, wasteful and destructive" (p. 416). Opotow (1991) concluded that conflicts have an important role in social development and are significant in education. Other research suggests that peer conflict can contribute to children's development play an important part of social interaction, and develop social cognitive skills (Deutsch, 1973, Shantz, 1987a and Shantz and Hobart, 1989.

In their everyday experiences and dealings with students, teachers come to form opinions about the students they teach and the conflicts they observe and help manage. It is noteworthy that research results indicate that teachers also negatively perceive individuals (students) involved in conflict. Teachers describe students involved in conflict as lacking in appropriate social skills and unable to adhere to social rules. Teachers respond as if conflict is "a sign of failed socialisation" (Shantz and Hobart, 1989, p.71) and "something only done by troublemakers" (Opotow 1991, p. 425). They cast these students as developmentally inferior (Opotow, 1991, p. 429-430).

The literature suggests the way in which conflicts are perceived by teachers can influence teachers' perceptions of students in conflict, and thus influence the effectiveness of conflict management. The implications that arise from the literature call for teachers to review (a) the way in which they perceive students in conflict; and (b) the way in which they manage students' conflicts.

Conflict Management Styles

Research indicates that different people use different strategies to manage conflict (Kilmann and Thomas, 1975). Various theoretical explanations of a person's use of a particular conflict management style exist. Kilmann and Thomas (1975) suggested that conflict is goal oriented; that is, the importance of personal goals affects a person's decision to use a particular style. Versatility in approach where conflict management style matches the situation seems to be logical.

Factors which influence the development of a child's perception and style of managing conflict include past experience, socialisation and the exposure to and modelling of different conflict styles. A child's conflict style may be influenced by how he/she sees disputes handled around him/her. Thus the importance of teachers as role models.

Conflict Management Strategies Used by Children

In the literature there is a range of classifications of the types of conflict management strategies used by children and adults. Table 1 illustrates the types

of conflict management strategies typically used by children and adults, as classified by Deutsch (1992), Johnson and Johnson (1996) and Smith, Inder and Ratcliff (1995).

Table 1. Classification of Types of Conflict Management Strategies used by Children and Adults

Deutsch (1992)	**Johnson and Johnson (1996)**	**Smith, Inder & Ratcliff (1995)**
Conflict avoidance- Conflict involvement aggressive, unyielding- assertive rigid-loose intellectual-emotional escalating-minimising compulsively revealing- compulsively concealing	Withdrawal Suppression Compromise Win or Lose Win and Win	Contending Yielding Problem solving Inaction Emotional

Smith, Inder and Ratcliff's (1995) investigation into the nature and context of children's conflicts revealed that disputes between children occurred at a relatively low rate, and that disputants used simple rather than complex management strategies. Results indicate that contending (the use of physical and verbal tactics) or trying to impose one's solution was the preferred (64%) strategy used by children during conflict. Yielding was most unusual (9%), as was problem solving (2%). In about one third of conflicts, no retaliation took place (Smith, Inder and Ratcliff, 1995).

Johnson, Johnson and Dudley (1992) and Johnson, Johnson, Dudley and Acikgoz's (1994) studies of primary aged children, found that the most frequently used strategies by children in conflicts were telling the teacher, arguing, withdrawal, and repeated requests.

Krappmann and Oswald (1987) identified three patterns in the strategies applied by the negotiating children: coercion and manipulation; offer and reply and, reasoning. Only 50% of the solutions to the negotiations were supported or accepted by both parties. All other negotiations were either left unresolved or terminated by one child. One quarter of the negotiations were influenced by an authoritative demand in the first step of initiation and one third in reaction to the child. Children did not always negotiate the problem at issue, rather the students' negotiation strategies differed according to the kind of communication style and means used to influence the other's behaviour.

The literature describing conflict management strategies selected by students reflect that many disputes are being ineffectively and destructively managed. Students are commonly selecting unproductive methods such as physical force, contention, verbal abuse and retaliation to manage conflicts. The strategies students selected were reactive rather than thoughtfully selected. The conclusion is that students lacked the skills to manage conflicts in constructive ways and were limited to two extreme reactions - fight or flee (Opotow, 1991).

Conflict Management Strategies Used by Teachers

There seems to be a contradiction in findings regarding teachers' involvement in children's conflicts. In reviewing conflict resolution and peer mediation programs in elementary and secondary schools, Johnson and Johnson (1996) indicate that, "Classroom teachers spend an inordinate amount of time and energy managing children's conflicts, which are often not managed well by students or by faculty" (p. 459). But results from Opotow's (1991) study offers a contrasting perspective. Only 2 of the 40 adolescent participants discussed their conflicts with school adults. Students indicated an unwillingness to go to teachers to intervene in their conflicts. The deterrents to seeking teacher intervention included a) "adults think conflict is for kids"; b) "they (teachers) think fighting is not necessary"; c) teacher involvement often leads to disciplinary action and, d) involving teachers risks humiliation with peers.

Whether teachers were aware of the conflicts and decided not to interfere or whether teachers did not realise they were missing subtle concealed conflicts remains unclear. Opotow's (1991) research of adolescent students, and Smith, Inder, and Ratcliff's (1995) study of students within primary schools indicate that teachers' role in children's conflicts, was minimal, whether in the classroom or outside it. "Teachers did not play much of a role in children's conflicts as most of these (conflicts) occurred in recreational time, and even in the classroom were not visible to the teacher" (p. 115).

Opotow's (1991) study reveals the school's impersonal and bureaucratic approach to managing conflicts between students. Conflicts defined as serious, as perceived by teachers were delegated to administrators, who then convened hearings that involved the disputants, and sometimes teachers and parents. Teachers handling conflict assumed an authoritarian persona, they would teachers intervene, command, lecture and dictate and describe themselves in these instances as - "bad guys" and "tough"(p. 426). The central focus for teachers in intervening in children's conflicts is often a forceful statement of school regulations. This reinforces the idea that conflict is about power, threat and coercion.

Teachers play a pivotal role in children's conflicts. The way that people view conflict influences the way they deal with conflict. Findings in both Shantz and

Hobart (1989) and Opotow's (1991) research suggest that there is a significant link between the depreciative perceptions and blame placed upon the students, to the conflict management strategies employed by the teacher.

As virtually all students experience conflict at some time, it is striking that in both Krappmann and Oswald (1987) and Opotow's (1991) reports so few teachers were involved in discussing the conflicts with students. Deterrents to adult involvement, as previously outlined in the literature review, directly relate to the negative ways in which teachers perceive and manage student conflict and the disputants. Students discussion of conflicts with teachers is explained in the findings as one way communication, an interrogation or lecture and not as an exchange. Student conflicts are found to be largely neglected and suppressed. Opotow (1991) reported that "Teacher descriptions of student conflict often highlight the pettiness and irrationality of conflict rather than their complexity and validity" (p. 430).

The rather low levels of the more sophisticated strategies, such as bargaining or turn taking, lead Smith, Inder and Ratcliff (1995) to the view that there is a role for teachers or more skilled peers in guiding the process of children's interactions. "The high level of conflict occurring while children were unoccupied calls for the need for teachers to intervene in recursive cycles of inappropriate social behaviour, and that they can encourage a more divergent approach to dealing with conflict" (p. 116).

There have been very few studies that examine the role of teachers in children's conflicts and in conflict management. However, there are studies that describe the ideal role of the teacher in conflict management as an active one (Johnson, Johnson and Dudley, 1992; Johnson and Johnson (1996). The ideal role of the teacher, implied in the review of conflict resolution programs, is to model and teach children the necessary skills to constructively manage their conflicts. That is, teaching students interpersonal skills necessary for effective communication and positive relationships, and teaching students effective and non violent methods of resolving conflicts (Cohen, 1995).

METHOD OVERVIEW

The research project explored the nature of students' conflicts, and the perceptions and conflict management strategies used by primary teachers and students within a Victorian primary school. This paper focuses on one aspect of the study – the role of the teacher in student conflict.

The Participants

The research was conducted in a small suburban primary school. The school has a low, but steadily increasing multicultural student population. Six teachers participated in the study, one male and five females. The teachers taught various year levels ranging from Prep to Year 6, and had various years of experience in the teaching profession. Six students in Year 4 (three females and three males) were aged between 9 and 10 years. They were all from one classroom.

The Method

The chosen method of inquiry was qualitative, based on a desire to understand the views and perspectives of the respondents. The use of multi-methods generated a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of teachers' and students' social interactions and conflict management styles. The data collection methods were interviews, participant observation and document analysis.

Student Interviews

Individual interviews (10 minutes each) were held with the six student participants. The purpose of the interview was to explore the nature of students' conflicts; and to seek an understanding of how students perceive and define conflict; and to investigate their conflict management strategies. The semi-structured interviews allowed for considerable flexibility in scope and depth. The interviewer presented scenarios and questions that focused on the understanding of the term 'conflict' and experiences of conflict responses at school.

Teacher Interviews

Individual interviews (10 to 15 minutes each) were held with the teachers participating in the study. The purpose of the interview was to explore the teachers' experiences of conflict between students; students' conflict management strategies; and the teachers' general perceptions of conflict.

The interview guide (based on a pilot study) was semi-structured, incorporating both specific and broad, general questions. The initial focus of the interview was on conflicts between students at school. Several questions also probed each teacher's experience and perception of personal conflict and their beliefs about their conflict responses and management approaches.

Participant Observation

As this study was qualitative, researching how teachers and students act and think in their own setting was important. Thirty-six observations of students at play in the school grounds were made over a period of 3 months. The observations took place during the latter 30 minutes of the lunch hour and the whole 20 minutes of recess time. Notes were discreetly taken on the observed behaviours and interactions between the student participants and other students and between student participants and teachers.

Classroom Observations

Observations in the Year 3 / 4 classroom were made of the Year 4 student participants and were held during general studies lessons, when students participated in cooperative group work and independent working groups. The students were observed for two hours, over a period of 2 days. Notes were taken of student behaviour during each lesson and group activity.

Document Analysis

A collection and analysis of relevant school documents took place before the interviews and observations. The documents collected were the Student Welfare Policy, Discipline Policy and Pastoral Care Policy. Analysis of documents involved identifying relevant policies and vision statements regarding students' conflicts and their management and those regarding student discipline, as outlined by the school and the Catholic Education Office.

Limitations of the Study

This study was exploratory in nature and consequently took a deliberately broad focus. The sample size was small therefore, the findings of this study could not be generalisable and could not be considered to be a representative sample of all primary schools. The data reflects existing patterns of conflict and the perceptions of students and teachers in one primary school.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this research have raised key themes about the nature of students' conflicts. The findings related to the students' and teachers' perceptions and management of conflicts are summarised in this paper. The implications for education, particularly the role of the teacher are discussed.

Perception of Conflict

The teachers in this study held similar beliefs to each other about conflict. They perceived conflict to be physically combative actions and behaviours that led to adverse outcomes. The teachers referred to conflict as undesirable behaviours with adverse effects by using terms such as 'fight', 'argument', 'grizzle'; 'hassles', and 'messy'. This is similar to findings by Opotow (1991).

Similarly, students' impressions and reports of conflict included physical actions and contact – "angry", "...fight", "...push", "kick". Conflict was viewed as an actively aggressive event; an event that leads to discord, differing perspectives "...don't agree", "think differently" break up" and distressing outcomes "upset", "sad" "sometimes frustrated".

Student Conflict Behaviours

The findings of this research suggest that conflict is a regular part of students' social interactions. A high proportion of disputes within the playground and classroom involved access and possession issues. Of the total 48 conflicts between students observed at school, only 13 incidents were observed in the classroom. Ten of these involved access and possession issues, two involved physical contact (snatch, push) and only one involved put down and teasing.

Thirty-five conflicts were observed in the playground and were related to access and possession. Table 2 presents a summary of the frequency and type of student conflict in the playground.

Table 2. Conflict Behaviours and Frequency Observed in the School Playground

Type of conflict	Conflict behaviour		Total
	Source	Outcome	
Physical contact	push/rough play	retaliation/hit kicking (2)	11
Put downs and teasing	verbal abuse threat		10
Possession and Access	interference by 3rd party group entry/ acceptance inconsistency in game rules possession of equipment ruling over other(s) in games		14

Overall, the findings demonstrate that students dealt with conflict in a variety of ways. These were coded into 7 categories (see Appendix 1). The coding of the conflict strategies students were observed to use was adapted from Smith, Inder and Ratcliff (1995) and Johnson and Johnson (1996). The categories consisted of contending, conflict avoidance, problem solving and inaction. The new category 'calling in third party' was added to create a classification scheme relevant to this particular research data.

Students' Conflict Management Strategies

Data shows that students used a variety of simple, rather than more complex and advanced methods of resolving conflicts and that they responded to conflicts rigidly and reflexively. Students most commonly used conflict management strategies involved contending: the use of force, threat, verbal and physical tactics. The high proportion of conflicts destructively managed or 'dealt with' by the students may be explained by several factors such as the students' developmental levels, social skill deficiencies, lack of learned and modelled alternative strategies.

The findings of this research concur with results from contemporary research conducted in schools in the United States of America and New Zealand, which highlighted contending (the use of force and aggressive verbal and physical tactics) as one of the preferred conflict management strategies used by students in conflict (De Cecco and Richards, 1974). Table 3 summarises the frequency and the observed conflict management strategies used by the students.

Table 3. Students Conflict Management Strategies and Frequency

Conflict management strategies	Frequency
Contending	
accusations	15
shout	12
tease	5
argue	6
physical contact	11
Smoothing	
give in	2
apology	4
Problem Solving	
confront by talk to solve	7
Withdrawal	
run or walk away	6
Compromising	
talk / negotiate	7
Emotional	
tears/cry	11
Calling in 3rd Party	
telling teacher	11

Teachers' Conflict Management Strategies

The data indicates that even though each of the teachers viewed conflict to be negative they responded in a variety of ways. The most common reactions involved contending strategies, traditional and authoritarian tactics such as pre-judging the situation, lecturing, separating disputants and imposing solutions.

Teachers believed stopping the conflict through teacher intervention (playing the role of third party, discussions, problem solving, arbitration and appeasing students) to be a successful and the preferred strategy in resolving conflict as it stopped the negative behaviour and unpleasantness. Interestingly, problem solving, which included encouragement for the students to collaboratively talk about the issue, was the least common of the approaches used by teachers. Table 4 outlines the responses and approaches used by teachers in managing student conflict in the playground.

The scheme to classify students' conflict management strategies was adapted to incorporate the strategy 'calling third party', when initiated by students or by teachers. The majority of teacher responses were contending strategies including verbal abuse and physical involvement. It is noted that, in managing student conflict in the playground, no teacher used smoothing or compromising.

Table 4. Teachers' Responses to Student Conflict

Teachers Responses	Frequency	Total
Contending		40
verbal abuse - shout, yell	10	
authoritarian - make decisions	14	
- direct or suggest	6	
decision	2	
no listening	1	
interruptions	2	
physical - grab	1	
warning given	4	
blamed, punishment	0	0
Smoothing		8
Problem Solving	5	
listen	2	
talk	1	
mediate		12
Withdrawal	2	
refer to other teacher	8	
inaction	1	
ignore	1	
send away	0	0
Compromising		9
Emotional	4	
anger	3	
frustration	2	
disinterest		31
Calling in 3rd Party	12	
teacher initiate	19	
students initiate		

The results of this research reveal that within the classroom, conflict management preventative techniques (Cohen 1995) were employed before conflicts arose or escalated. Teachers used techniques to suppress and discourage the development of conflicts. These consisted of arbitration, smoothing strategies, such as using humour and praising the positive in the student's negative behaviour, withdrawal strategies, particularly avoidance tactics and ignoring behaviour, and contending strategies. Using authority over students was a common method used to manage conflicts within the playground and classroom. Findings reveal that when the contending strategies were employed to manage disruptive behaviour or escalating conflicts, the outcome generally involved disciplinary action such as asking students to be quiet, moving students from one another, giving students "time out" or other consequences.

Perception and Management Link

The findings suggest a link between teacher and student's perception of conflict and their selected conflict management strategies. No teacher viewed conflict as positive and this was reflected in the negative ways conflict was dealt with. Only one teacher sometimes used a problem solving approach.

For example teachers who considered student conflict to be 'grizzles' and not serious often minimised the situation by suggesting to students alternative actions such as "...walk away". or '...play a different game". Teachers who believed conflicts to be the "..inability to compromise" and to have "...very clear rules", reflect an authoritarian type approach to managing disputes - regularly involving a firm voice, lecturing about school rules and incorrect behaviour.

Students who believed 'saying sorry' to be important were inclined to resolve quarrels by smoothing the situation by apologising, conceding, making suggestions to change the games and 'be friends'. Students who viewed conflicts to be '...fighting" and "..getting into trouble" withdrew and avoided the dispute or tried to keep the peace. Those who believed conflicts to be "...fighting, pushing and hitting someone" tended to use contending strategies such as physical action and verbal abuse.

As suggested in the literature, the results of the research indicate that how teachers and students perceive conflict often shape how they handle it, and that it mirrors the way it is widely viewed in society, that is a negative phenomenon, an event that should be avoided (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995).

The Role of the Teacher

Intervention was a strategy teachers' commonly used to manage disputes. It was the common practice for students to 'tell teachers' and for teachers to then 'fix it' rather than students utilising more effective conflict management and resolution

skills. Overall teachers viewed teacher intervention as a part of their role in helping students resolve conflicts. Even though the teachers often reported feeling 'annoyed' and 'frustrated' by taking on the role of 'arbitrator' observations revealed that teachers frequently initiated intervention in student disputes.

Both students and teachers viewed intervention to be a successful strategy in managing conflicts as it stopped the disturbing and inappropriate behaviour. The findings however, reveal that even though the destructive behaviour was stopped, conflicts recurred, many were left unresolved (ie. without reaching satisfactory solutions).

An effective conflict resolution system assists in eradicating the perceived (or actual) role of 'referee' and 'arbitrator' that teachers have assumed as a result of repeatedly using intervention to control student altercations. Constructive alternatives to managing conflicts to attain mutually satisfying results redirects the teacher's role to one more pertinent, involved and specific. That is, to model and teach students how to appropriately manage and resolve their own disputes, in a variety of ways and to equip them with the necessary skills for a win/win situation rather than win/lose situation.

The ideal role of a teacher, according to Girard and Koch (1996), is to teach students how to solve their own disputes. The implications for teachers at the classroom level are twofold. First, incorporating conflict resolution into the classroom would require teachers to be proficient in the concepts, process and skills of conflict resolution and fluent in collaborative age appropriate problem solving strategies (Girard and Koch,1996). Second, it requires teachers to provide students with the opportunities to practice and develop the necessary skills and strategies to increase their ability to resolve their own disputes (Opotow and Deutsch, 2000; Johnson and Johnson,1995).

Whilst there is no right or wrong way to respond to conflict, it is the way in which people respond in a conflict situation that makes it harmful or beneficial. Conflict resolution is a key to unlock the rigidity in the way conflicts are managed. It is an appropriate process in schools, which lead to collaborative problem solving and positive relations.

Effective conflict resolution is built on the foundations and principles of cooperation and collaboration. Cooperation with others in leisure, work and learning is crucial for developing satisfying interpersonal relations and reaching positive outcomes and team goals. Collaboration is essential to resolving conflicts, for being able to collaborate with others we are able to reach mutually satisfying solutions to a problem for a 'win-win' result (Opotow and Deutsch, 2000). The combined skills of cooperation and collaboration equip students with powerful social, 'conflict positive' tools for success and beyond.

Whilst the principles behind conflict resolution apply to many different types of conflicts, teachers and students need to recognise that not all conflicts can be easily resolved and at times seeking a third party (mediation) may be the best possible solution reached.

Skilling Students

The high proportion of destructively managed conflicts, reported in the findings, suggests that students have not been taught or have not learned the necessary skills for effective conflict management and resolution. Students who have not been taught to resolve conflicts effectively with others cannot be expected to do so. Hence, students rely on skills they are familiar with and quite often react to conflict habitually and destructively (aggressive or physical response, confrontation, reliance on teacher intervention, avoidance, submission) rather than manage it constructively (talk, listen, collaborative problem solving).

Students require explicit guidance in order to resolve their interpersonal conflicts. Teaching interpersonal skills such as active listening, communication, assertiveness and problem solving can help students resolve issues in less destructive ways, ie redefine the problem and find mutual satisfactory solutions or resolution to the problem. Conflict resolution training involves providing students with opportunities to practice these techniques, to interact with others and to solve every day problems.

Through problem solving tasks students can learn to develop many solutions to a problem, to consider the outcomes of their actions and to make decisions. Teachers can also structure constructive controversy (Johnson and Johnson, 1979,1987) to help prepare students to appropriately deal with problems.

Conflict Resolution Programs

There are now many training programs and curricula available for teaching students social skills, conflict resolution and violence prevention. Peer Mediation is one of the most common school dispute resolution systems (Opotow and Deutsch, 2000). Schools are recognising the value of peer teaching and cross age tutoring programs such as Peer Support and Buddies as they encourage cooperation and foster positive social interaction between students, providing tools for the development of productive relationships.

Such programs have the greatest effect when they are accepted and supported by the whole school. To some, implementing conflict resolution into schools may be considered an added pressure and high expectations placed on the school. While stand alone programs in schools have value but whole school change and action is needed for full impact.

CONCLUSION

As teachers are often the first adults to be aware of student conflict, their perceptions and management of conflict in the school is a significant one. Teachers need to consider and question their part in enhancing productive conflict management. What role do teachers have in managing student conflict? For instance is it to "...intervene to stop fights" and "...sort out the (students') problems" to ensure playground and classroom harmony? Is it to be 'referee' or 'judge' between disputing students? We suggest that the teachers' role in skilling students is of utmost importance.

Schools are the main setting outside of the home where students are able to learn, develop and trial social skills, concepts and tactics of dispute resolution. Within conflict positive classrooms, teachers are able to guide students towards social and interpersonal growth and skill them to become effective conflict managers.

As educators it is vital to remember that schools and classrooms should be a stimulating and friendly place, where students are able to develop constructive relationships. Effective use of conflict as a tool for learning fosters positive interpersonal relationships. If we teach students to productively manage their own disputes schools and classrooms will become more conducive to learning and development.

Conflicts cannot be eliminated but skilling students to effectively manage conflicts is possible and we believe necessary. Teaching the principles and skills of conflict resolution relates to the fundamental mission of the school, which is to provide students with the skills necessary to function effectively in society. Teachers play a vital role in helping students to manage their own problems.

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APPENDIX 1

Coding Classification of the Students' Conflict Management Strategies

A	Contending	force, physical and verbal tactics
B	Smoothing	give in, use of apology, humour to keep harmony
C	Problem Solving	negotiation, confront the issue to solve and to seek solution that is satisfactory to both parties
D	Withdrawal	avoid conflict with person, postpone conflict
E	Compromise	meet on equal terms, goals not met
F	Emotional	crying as a response to conflict
G	Calling in a third party	telling the teacher, calling friends to assist

Johnson and Johnson (1996); Smith, Inder & Ratcliff (1995)